

U9 Academy Review Fall 2007

The inaugural season of the U9 Academy format was a terrific success, but there is always room for improvement. Here is a general overview of observations from this fall:

The GOOD and GREAT

- **More Kids Playing Soccer** One of the goals and purposes of the U9 academy format was to allow clubs to have an unlimited number of U9 players as opposed to having them select out due to roster size limitations of 12. Because of the “expanded” roster concept and players not being put onto traditional “teams,” 214 extra players were kept by the clubs as opposed to being “cut” or not selected.
- **More “Playing” Time** The game is the best teacher. Another goal was to allow clubs the opportunity to keep more players for purposes of splitting them into playing groups of 7-10. This allowed for players to get more playing time on the field. In the older format, some clubs would maximize their rosters (12) leaving 6 players on the bench. All players need to learn from the game and what better way then to allow them the opportunity to actually play, get more touches, have the opportunity to make decisions, and have fun.
- **Kicks For Cancer Warm-up** Before the first match of every academy play date, the players were encouraged to get 500 touches on the ball to count towards their 2000 total for the Kicks For Cancer campaign. This was implemented as part of their warm-up period. There were many venues that had all of the players together, mixing with players from other clubs to do this. And we had wonderful leadership for these activities as coaches who are members of the Indiana Youth Soccer Hall of Fame and/or Coaching Committee stepped up to take all of the players through the warm-up. The atmosphere was one of excitement, cooperation, and fun. One academy date had the players doing stations with the Michigan Director of Coaching Brett Jacobs joining along. This was the vision all along to have the players work on technique at every academy play date.
- **Breaking Down Club Barriers** Due to the Kicks For Cancer campaign and having all of the players getting 500 touches, this encouraged clubs to communicate prior to each academy play date for organizational purposes – i.e. determining how many players they will have, and how clubs were going to divide up their players for the day. This extra communication was vital in helping break down barriers between clubs as they all worked together to ensure that every play date was positive and fun.

- **Playing with Friends** Because clubs did not place players on “set” rosters, clubs were able to freely move players from field to field during a play date. Players liked this because they enjoyed playing with their friends – regardless of ability level. Due to the added flexibility, players were also allowed to play with players of like abilities throughout the season.
- **Synergy** There were several academy club sizes, ranging in size from large pools of kids to smaller pools with only seven or eight players on a roster. Instead of forfeiting a match when a smaller academy was a few children short, clubs worked together and “loaned” each other players. This happened quite a few times at academy play dates and helped create a better and more “fun” environment. There were many clubs who “loaned” the other club their “best” player which again was a tremendous effort in helping to create balanced matches.
- **Impact Players** Coaches who truly understood the spirit of the academy concept took advantage of the freedom given to them. Due to players not being rostered onto traditional teams, coaches could move players around from field to field making the matches less lopsided. They did this by moving impact players to another field, loaning them to the other club for a half, putting them in goal, and developing the leadership skills of the players.
- **Referee Development** Referee mentoring occurred at many of the Academy play dates. This was one of the visions of the academy program and concept. Giving new and younger referees the opportunity to officiate a travel/select match and being mentored afterwards will hopefully help improve retention rates and competency levels of the young referees in our state.
- **Player Development** In speaking with many of the club academy directors, due to mixing all of the abilities, players who would have normally been placed on “B” or “C” teams showed great improvement throughout the season. Because clubs were not allowed to create traditionally “set” rosters, players who showed improvement were allowed to later play with groups of players who were “ahead of the curve.” This is similar to a club pass concept which the club academy directors and coaches enjoyed.
- **Player Creativity** During the academy play dates I observed, I saw very little coaching and more players trying to take risks without the fear of making mistakes. At these younger ages, players need to be able to “express” themselves and be allowed to try things without the fear of losing the match.
- **Parent Education** At the first NISL play date, there was a terrific opportunity for parent education. After a short presentation by myself and several members of the Indiana Soccer Hall of Fame, parents and adult spectators better understood the mission and purpose of the U9 Academy concept. This led to positive

behavior on the sidelines in that particular league and no matter what the outcome of the game, the players left the fields with smiles on their faces.

Areas for Improvement:

- **Lopsided Matches** As could be expected, the first play date weekend was a learning experience for everyone. Although no scores or standings were kept in the leagues, some academies seemed overwhelmed and not quite as prepared as others. Due to some clubs being overwhelmed, players and adults sometimes got discouraged and frustrated. However, as the season advanced, communication improved and academy directors became more proficient at moving players from field to field to make the games more balanced and competitive.
- **Concept Education & Communication**. Although the academy concept was premised with a two-year educational endeavor, not everyone fully understood the format and the mission of the academy. While most clubs implemented the format correctly, improved education and communication to all groups could help reduce tension and division.
- **Referee Education & Communication** The first academy date was a learning experience for all of us. At first, referees didn't understand that clubs could move players from field to field and loan a player or two to other clubs if they were short. After improving communication and education about the academy format with the referee community, most problems were resolved and the academy became a great environment for referee development.
- **Kicks For Cancer Program** Another first year program, the Kicks for Cancer program could be improved with better communication and organization. Each academy host site implemented this program in different ways which caused some confusion. Ideally it would be terrific to have all of the players come together at the host site and mix with each other to get the 500 touches per academy date. This can be improved, however, over time.
- **More Referees Needed** For a variety of reasons, not all venues had the correct amount of referees needed for the academy matches. The referee shortage was very stressful to the league administrators as they scrambled to get the proper number of referees. This can be improved through better communication, planning and coordination between the league, host venues, referee community and Indiana Youth Soccer state office.
- **Field Layout & Proximity** Some venues had fields that were very spread out over a large area or soccer complex. This field layout hindered club coaches/academy directors in moving impact players to another match for purposes of stopping "blowouts." As we move into future academy seasons,

Indiana Youth Soccer and the supporting leagues will work together to better outline venue specifications.

- **Length of the Academy Day** Many coaches and parents enjoyed the concept of having two matches in a day to allow a weekend for rest and family in between match dates. However, this fall was an unusually warm one in our state which meant that the days for the players, parents/adult spectators, was a long one. We will continue to evaluate this concept and encourage feedback from everyone involved.
- **Player Reliability** Due to the “non-traditional” team format, some players didn’t feel as compelled to faithfully report for game dates. In other words, the “I have to show up or I will let down the team” concept seemed to be missing in some cases. As a result some academies found themselves short on players after the league schedule was already created. This challenge was actually remedied on game days as clubs “loaned” players to help create even team. Again, this was a positive element to the U9 format.
- **Coaching Attributes** Different types of coaches will thrive in different situations and, in turn, help their players develop and find success on the field. When selecting the types of coaches needed in a youth academy environment, clubs should be mindful of the coaching attributes necessary. We can improve the experience for all children by selecting Academy Directors who are strong in developing players and understand that winning is not as vital when they are 8 or 9 years of age. Clubs must also be diligent in selecting staff coaches who understand the academy concept and support player development over winning. The highest satisfaction rates were reported by coaches, players, and parents from clubs with coaching leadership modeling these behaviors and attributes.
- **Parent & Spectator Education** While most adults understood the mission and concept of the Academy, the idea of developing players instead of “teams” was sometimes difficult for adults to embrace. The concept of not keeping results/standings is also a variation from tradition and will take some time for everyone to alter their ways of thinking. Finally, the concept that players need to have the freedom to play without constant coaching from the sidelines (from coaches, parents and spectators) also represents a change in approach. Youth sports and psychology is constantly involving and we must focus on those approaches which are most supportive of child development.

As the Director of Education for Indiana Youth Soccer, I truly believe that the benefits of the U9 academy format far outweigh any disadvantages. Although we encountered a host of challenges this season in terms of logistics, education and communication, we worked together to overcome these problems; most importantly, we learned from the experience.

In the end, players were being creative and playing the game without the fear of losing. Coaches were settling down and really focusing on player development. Clubs worked together to create a better and more fun environment for everyone. Young referees were being trained and assessed in a supportive, developmentally-friendly environment. In short, we all worked together to give the game back to the kids. And I wonder, why did we ever steal it from them in the first place?

This season has certainly seen its ups and downs (more ups though), and we will take the good and the bad to make it better for future seasons. For the fall of 2008, I am please to announce that the academy format will be extended to include both the U9 and U10 age groups, fulfilling the original vision of the Indiana Youth Soccer Coaching Committee and creating the best possible environment for children to develop and flourish through youth soccer.